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David L. Raugh
University of Central Florida, raugh6@gmail.com

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Is the Hybrid Threat a True Threat?

Abstract

Does the “hybrid threat” discussed in General Marty Dempsey’s 2015 United States National Military Strategy make logical sense? In this paper I define the national security threat risk assessment process, examine the most significant US security threats, and study the hybrid threat. I conclude that the hybrid threat is the one that could most exploit our nation’s critical vulnerabilities- both from a security and foreign policy perspective. I conclude with a study of security and economic methods to reduce this threat.

Introduction

Threats to the United States are widespread and ever changing. On July 1st, 2015, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and General Martin Dempsey unveiled the 2015 National Military Strategy. In it, General Dempsey discussed threats to the United States along a continuum of conflict, highlighting specifically the significant dangers of a "hybrid threat."[1] Many pundits today regard the hybrid threat synonymous with "little green men;" a nod to the Russian *Spetznaz* forces that took part in the initial occupation of portions of Ukraine in 2014.[2] While this threat poses a concern to a politically divided state like the Ukraine, are these types of forces a "real" national security threat to the United States when compared to the other myriad of threats in the contemporary environment?

Unfortunately they are. The hybrid threat occupies a prime spot in fine balance between probability of action and significance of consequence that make it the biggest threat over the next decade. This article supports this claim by defining the problem, examining the threat spectrum, and articulating what the hybrid threat is. It concludes by examining some potential counteractions to it.

Definitions

National Security Threats

In 1943 Walter Lippmann provided one of the first definitions of U.S. national security when he wrote, "a nation has security when it does not have to sacrifice its legitimate interests to avoid war, and is able, if challenged, to maintain them by war."[3] U.S. Defense Secretary Harold Brown provided more specificity to these interests, including considering interests outside of its borders, when he defined national security as:

> "The ability to preserve the nation's physical integrity and territory; to maintain its economic relations with the rest of the world on

[1] U.S. Department of Defense, *National Military Strategy 2015* (Washington D.C.: JCS, 2015), available at: *http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/2015_National_Military_Strategy.pdf*.
[2] Vitaly Shevchenko, "Little Green Men or Russian Invaders," *BBC News*, March 11, 2014, available at: *http://www. bbc. com/news/world-europe-26532154*.
[3] Lippmann, Walter, *US Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 1943).

> reasonable terms; to preserve its nature, institution, and governance from disruption from outside; and to control its borders."[4]

More recently, the U.S. Department of Defense considers the sometimes-adversarial nature of national security, the mix of military force and foreign relations, and the mix of symmetric and asymmetric threats when it describes it as:

> "Encompassing both national defense and foreign relations of the United States with the purpose of gaining: a military or defense advantage over any foreign nation or group of nations; a favorable foreign relations position; or a defense posture capable of successfully resisting hostile or destructive action from within or without, overt or covert."[5]

With these definitions of national security in mind, a definition of national security threats can be articulated as: State, organizational, or individual actions that threaten the nation's territorial integrity or its domestic and international interests.

Risk Assessment

A second definition worth exploring is risk assessment. In basic terms, risk assessment is a process that allows prioritization of threats to allow mitigation during the later risk management process. Although several definitions exist throughout international relations literature, the U.S. Department of Defense's definition of "identification and assessment of hazards" is simple and effective.[6] Of note, this assessment includes categorizing each threat by a probability of occurrence (what is the chance it will occur?) as well as a consequence of impact (how much cumulative damage will it cause?). This risk assessment nomenclature can be used to effectively assess the spectrum of possible threats.

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[4] Watson, Cynthia A. *US National Security: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara, CA: Abc-clio, 2002).
[5] U.S. Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington D.C.: JCS, 2016), available at: *http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf*.
[6] Ibid.

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National Security Threats Considered

When pondering a list of potential national security risks, one must consider external and internal, state and non-state, and security and non-security threats. The first external and internal non-state threat considered is Violent Extremist Organizations (VEO), which President Obama defines as individuals who support or commit ideologically motivated violence to further political goals.[7] These groups include both ideologically-motivated international terrorist organizations (ITO) and homegrown violent extremists (HVE). Both fall under the rubric of terrorists, though HVEs may operate individually, as opposed to in groups. Specific VEO tactics against the United States vary widely, but ultimately they seek to generate fear in the U.S. population by attacking targets that heighten the level of insecurity within the state.[8] One could discount them as the primary threat for two reasons. First, homegrown violent extremism does not appear to be growing.[9] Secondly, although VEO and HVE attacks have a higher probability of occurrence when compared to other security threats and do have an admitted psychological impact on a population, the combined consequence of overall damage to the United States (9-11 aside) is low when compared to other potential threats.[10]

A second external state-based threat to consider is adversarial states—regional strongmen with previous adversarial relations with the United States—primarily including Russia and China. Adversarial states could theoretically attack the U.S. homeland, using intercontinental and submarine-based conventional and nuclear strike capabilities. They similarly could attack U.S. overseas assets and allies using conventional air, ground, and sea-based forces. Adversarial states can also disrupt internal and external

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[7] The White House, *Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the President, 2011), available at: *https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/sip-final.pdf*.

[8] Lutz, James M. and Brenda J. Lutz, *Global Terrorism*, (New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2004).

[9] Risa A. Brooks, "Muslim "Homegrown" Terrorism in the United States," *International Security* 36:2 (2011): 7-47, available at: *http://live.belfercenter.org/files/Muslim%20Homegrown%20Terrorism%20in%20the%20United%20States.pdf*.

[10] Nadia Khomami, "Terrorist Attacks by Violent Jihadis in the US since 9/11," *The Guardian* (December 5, 2015), available at: *http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/05/terrorist-attacks-by-islamists-in-the-us-since-911*; Bruno S. Frey, Simon Leuchinger and Alois Stutzer, "Calculating Tragedy: Assessing the Costs of Terrorism," *Journal of Economic Surveys* 21:1 (January 25, 2007): 1-24; Navin A.Bapat, and Sean Zeigler, "Terrorism, Dynamic Commitment Problems, and Military Conflict," *American Journal of Political Science* 60:2 (October 5, 2015).

command and control by targeting American technological dependencies. The U.S. military is highly dependent on space-based command, control, and communications. Disrupting or destroying space-based satellites could significantly hinder American force communications, navigation, and surveillance.[11] Another reason to discount this group as the primary threat is that, while these attacks would have a high consequence of impact when compared to other threats, their probability of occurrence is much lower than others. Although these states may pursue subversive actions to undermine U.S. power and influence, they are unlikely to challenge at a level of significance that would cause counteraction by the United States. The current system of international institutions as a means of defusing tension, the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons, and economic interdependencies throughout the international economy, all combine to reduce probability of their occurrence to almost nil.[12]

A third threat to consider is transnational criminal networks (TCN). TCNs are a non-state internal and external national security threat. TCN criminals will not seek to destabilize or overthrow the United States, but instead contest a state's claims in matters relating to its monopoly over force and law.[13] This is especially dangerous because states plagued by chronic state failures are statistically more likely to host terrorist groups that commit transnational attacks.[14] In Mexico, TCNs have effectively assumed control over many local and regional activities to include provision of social services, despite aggressive actions by the Mexican government to destroy cartel leadership structures.[15] In many cases, the Mexican government has limited options in response. TCNs desire unmolested ability to turn a profit, generally using illicit goods. Unfortunately, these groups possess abilities that terror networks desire: Transportation, communication networks, and access to illicit goods. As a result, a crime-terror nexus can occur either through internal transformation to develop a VEO capability, or through convergence

[11] Roger Handberg, "The Sanctuary Approach, the First Space Arms Race: Back to the Future," Unpublished Manuscript.
[12] Vayrynen, Raimo, *The Waning of Major War: Theories and Debates* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).
[13] Jarmon, Jack A., *The New Era in U.S. National Security : An Introduction to Emerging Threats and Challenges* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).
[14] Piazza, James A., "Incubators of terror: do failed and failing states promote transnational terrorism?" *International Studies Quarterly* 52:3 (2008): 469-488, available at: *http://pakistansocietyofvictimology.org/Userfiles/Terrorism%20and%20Failed%20States%20ISQ%202008.pdf*.
[15] Calderón, Gabriela, Alberto Diaz-Cayeros, Beatriz Magaloni and Gustavo Robles, "The Beheading of Criminal Organizations and the Dynamics of Violence in Mexico," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59:8 (2015).

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with existing terror groups to create a hybrid group.[16] This is doubly effective since the regional instability created by terror activities favors crime activities that create funds to finance terror activity.[17] Despite this, TCNs are unlikely to take any major direct action against the United States, including significant collusion with VEOs, for one primary reason. They rely upon illicit sales within the United States for profit; attacks (or enabling attacks) would degrade their "cash cow," likely depriving them of their highly profitable livelihood, and thus have an exceedingly low probability of occurrence.[18] In conclusion, while continued TCN illicit activity is likely, the probability and consequence of TCN-VEO collusion leading to security threats in the United States appears to be fairly low.

Lastly, the primary non-security threats to consider are economic insolvency and climate change. Recently, Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Senator Rand Paul both called the U.S. national debt the greatest threat to U.S. national security.[19] Simony Dalby asks why more attention is given to a potential terrorist nuclear attack (low probability/high consequence) when the likelihood and negative outcome of climate change (high probability/grave consequences) appears much more to the detriment of the United States and the world.[20] Both are legitimate threats, and many would argue that these pose a greater threat in long-term destruction to the United States than any other potential misfortune. Despite this, any military action to mitigate them will only be part of a major concerted effort that combines all elements of national power. Specifically, for climate change, concerted actions are needed at the international level. This leaves the hybrid threat, which sits at the midway point on the probability of occurrence and severity of impact spectrums.

The Hybrid Threat

The Hybrid Threat Defined

The hybrid threat occupies the realm between state-on-state (external) war and intrastate (internal) wars. Figure one below visually demonstrates its

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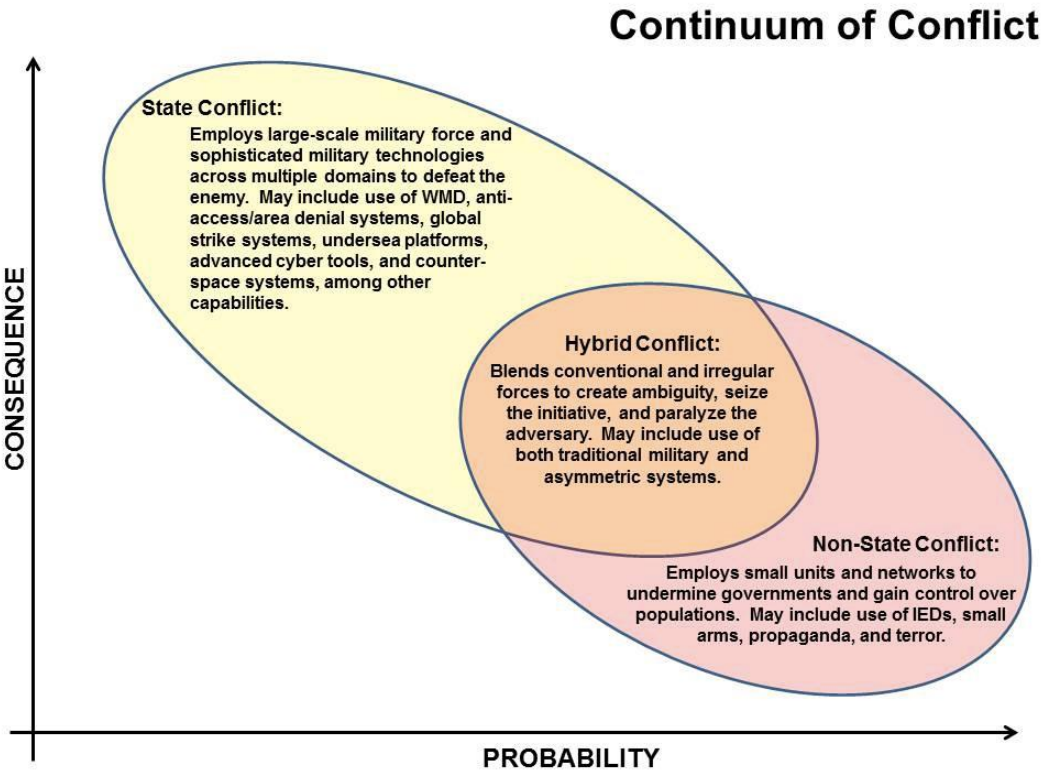
[16] Thomas Sanderson, "Transnational Terror and Organized Crime: Blurring the Lines," *Sais Review* 24:1(2004): 49-61, available at: *http://www.shirleymohr.com/JHU/Sample_Articles_JHUP/SAI_2004_24_1.pdf*.
[17] Jarmon, *The New Era*.
[18] Sanderson, "Transnational Terror and Organized Crime."
[19] Rand Paul, "The Biggest Threat to Our National Security," *The American Spectator* (September, 2011) available at: *http://spectator.org/articles/37020/biggest-threat-our-national-security*.
[20]Williams, Paul D., *Security Studies: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013).

intersection between these two types of conflict. According to General Dempsey, the hybrid threat is:

> "An area of conflict where actors blend techniques, capabilities, and resources to achieve their objectives… Hybrid conflicts also may be comprised of state and non-state actors working together toward shared objectives…Hybrid conflicts serve to increase ambiguity, complicate decision-making, and slow the coordination of effective responses."[21]

Figure 1: Conflict Spectrum from the 2015 National Military Strategy[22]



As a result, a hybrid threat occupies the United States' potential state or non-state adversaries' "sweet spot" in opportunities for action. Adversarial states, a resurgent Russia and expanding China, will remain deterred from large-scale state-on-state conflict with the United States due to its strategic nuclear weapon deterrence force. Similarly, violent extremist organizations remain unable to do more than limited (and often uncoordinated) terror attacks on

[21] U.S Department of Defense, *National Military Strategy 2015*.
[22] Ibid.

https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol9/iss2/2
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the U.S. homeland and overseas interests. However, both adversaries can conduct unconventional (state adversaries) or conventional (non-state adversaries) activities to a level that renders impotent U.S. force options and achieves their regional objectives. Using non-conventional means, they can target the United States internally by means of cyber war, specifically via sabotage, espionage, and subversion.[23] As an example, Russian forces utilized proxy and irregular forces, supported by cyber attacks on Ukraine government command and control, to seize Crimea and other portions of the Ukraine. A lack of targeting data and previous withdrawal of significant U.S. forces from Europe prevented significant U.S. responses beyond international sanctions. Similarly, Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL) forces currently conduct near-conventional attacks in Syria and Iraq; the U.S. withdrawal of major combat forces from Iraq in 2011 and a resistance to large scale force commitment prevented decisive actions to defeat this threat. Recent U.S. and coalition actions to bolster Iraqi forces using airstrikes and special operations forces have had some success in Iraq, but only after months of ISIL advances.

Probability

Hybrid conflict lies midway on the probability of occurrence spectrum. It is more likely than actual state-on-state conflict, but less likely than general terror attacks. Several reasons support this position. First, instances of these activities, as discussed in the paragraph above, are already occurring to a limited degree in the international arena. Ineffective U.S. responses, combined with continued atrophy of American military force structure, will only promote more adversaries to choose similar responses.

Second, both VEOs and TCNs have, over time, developed more international objectives when compared to their activity only a short time ago. Martha Crenshaw compares "old" terrorists who "sought short-term political power through revolution, national liberation, or secession" and "new" terrorist groups who "seek to transform the world."[24] Similarly, TCNs, greatly assisted by the deregulation made possible by globalization policies, expand across now-porous state borders in an effort to create profits.[25] Both groups now have much greater access to military technology once limited only to states,

[23] Thomas Rid, "Cyber War Will Not Take Place," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35:1 (February, 2012): 5-32.
[24] Martha Crenshaw, "The Psychology of Terrorism: An Agenda for the 21st Century," *Political Psychology* 21:2 (June, 2000): 405-420, available at: *http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/0162-895X.00195/abstract*.
[25] Sanderson, "Transnational Terror and Organized Crime."

thus decreasing the U.S. technological comparative advantage *vis-à-vis* its adversaries.

Third, hybrid conflict allows "war on the cheap." As clearly shown in figure two below, the United States spends dramatically higher amounts of monies on defense spending. Although this comparison assumes less significance when compared as a percentage of state GDP, it still is shockingly evident that the United States is spending to maintain its position of military supremacy in the international community. Hybrid conflict techniques allow much weaker state or non-state adversaries to use indirect approaches to gain a position of advantage; using low-cost techniques such as cyber espionage enable these adversaries to gain intellectual property that can subsequently be reverse engineered and produced without a high-cost research and development price tag.[26] Similarly, China's effort to produce anti-ship missiles theoretically pits a several thousand-dollar Chinese missile against a $13 billion modern U.S. aircraft carrier.[27] Putin used relatively low-cost hybrid techniques, including expansive propaganda efforts, in his seizure of portions of Ukraine to shore up his domestic political support in Russia. He accomplished this spectacularly despite his state suffering an ongoing steady decline in Russian GDP annual growth rate.[28]

[26] Jon R. Lindsay, "Stuxnet and the Limits of Cyber Warfare," *Security Studies* 22:3 (January, 2013): 365-404, available at: *http://erikgartzke.com/assets/lindsay2013_stuxnet.pdf*.
[27] Jan Van Tol, et al., "AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept," *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*, 2010, available at: *file:///C:/Users/Autumn/Downloads/2010.05.18-AirSea-Battle.pdf*.
[28] Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul, "Who Lost Russia (This Time)? Vladimir Putin," *The Washington Quarterly* 38:2 (Summer, 2015): 167-187, available at: *https://twq.elliott.gwu.edu/sites/twq.elliott.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Stoner-McFaul_Summer%202015.pdf*.

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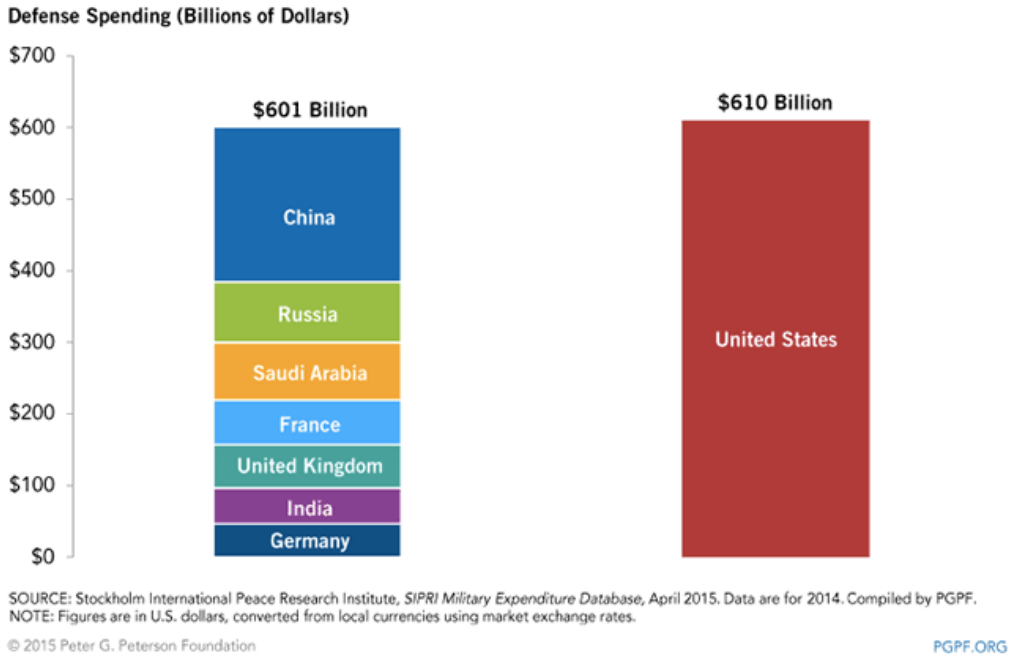
Figure 2: 2012 International Defense Spending (in billions)[29]



Fourth, as mentioned previously, adversarial states are more likely to pursue this less-confrontational technique instead of high-intensity conventional conflict because the United States still maintains a formidable strategic nuclear deterrence force that would promote caution. Cyber activities, for example, as part of this hybrid conflict, are generally non-attributable to the instigator of attack. This puts the United States at a significant disadvantage because without effective attribution, deterrence is also impossible; no one knows whom to deter.[30]

Severity

So how severe will the cumulative damage of hybrid attacks or conflicts be? Similar to the probability scale, the consequences of hybrid attacks lie midway on the severity scale. Reasons for this include the effect of surprise. State or non-state organizations choosing to attack using hybrid conflict techniques do so to take advantage of the ambiguity of their actions. State organizations using proxy or irregular forces can make large battlefield gains before international organizations can affix firm attribution and coordinate effective responses. Similarly, the United States has always struggled with detection of

[29] Peter G. Peterson Foundation, "The United States Spends More on Defense Than the Next Seven Countries Combined," *Peter G. Peterson Foundation*, 2016, available at: *http://www.pgpf.org/sites/default/files/PGPF-Chart-Pack.pdf*.
[30] Lindsay, "Stuxnet and the Limits of Cyber Warfare."

unconventional forces due to its increased reliance on technical versus human intelligence-based (HUMINT) reconnaissance and surveillance.[31] Research has shown that surprise in combat results in significant success to the initiator, resulting in negative effects on the victim of the surprise attack.[32] Second, hybrid conflicts are likely to cause more damage since they "blend conventional and irregular forces."[33] Unlike individual terror attack techniques that generally cause limited destruction, hybrid attacks blend combined arms techniques that could wreak massive damage in a short amount of time.

Third, U.S. inaction in the face of hybrid conflicts results in loss of prestige within the international community. As the sole international unipolar power, many look to the United States for protection and decisive action in the face of hybrid threats such as Russia in the Ukraine and ISIL in Iraq and Syria. Unfortunately, the deceptive and ambiguous nature of hybrid action prevents U.S. and allied decisive action due to lack of attribution and identification for targeting. Since the presence of an unchecked hybrid threat increases security tension regionally, it may encourage former allies to move from a U.S. band-wagoning approach to a regional balancing strategy.[34] A prime example of this is Saudi Arabia's decision to lead regional Arab military operations against terrorists in Yemen.[35] Since coordinated international actions are unable to defeat hybrid threats overseas, the United States is forced to increase defensive border-securing measures to protect its homeland.

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[31] Gabriel Margolis, "The Lack of HUMINT: A Recurring Intelligence Problem," *Global Security Studies* 4:2 (Spring, 2013): 43-60, available at: *http://globalsecuritystudies.com/Margolis%20Intelligence%20(ag%20edits).pdf*.
[32] Dupuy, Trevor N., *The Evolution of Weapons and Warfare* (Fairfax, VA: Da Capo Press, 1984); Ralph Rotte and Christoph M. Schmidt, "On the Production of Victory: Empirical Determinants of Battlefield Success in Modern War," *The Institute for the Study of Labor* (May, 2002), available at: *http://ftp.iza.org/dp491.pdf*.
[33] U.S. Department of Defense, *National Military Strategy 2015*.
[34] Nuno P. Monteiro, "Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity is Not Peaceful," *International Security* 36:3, available at: *http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/ISEC_a_00064*.
[35] Frederic Wehrey, "Into the Maelstrom: the Saudi-led Misadventure in Yemen," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (March, 2015), available at: *http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=59500*.

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Defeat/Prevention Mechanisms

In order to prevent or defeat hybrid threats from ultimately overwhelming the United States, it must make significant shifts to its current national security and policy prerogatives. Specifically, it must modify current military and domestic economic policies.

Military Policy Changes

First, the United States must reinvest in HUMINT capability. The United States has become increasing reliant on the use of unmanned aerial vehicles as a method to collect intelligence. Unfortunately, hybrid threats use concealment and deception to stymie effective and timely identification. What is needed is a collector with the context and situational understanding to identify changes in an environment that indicate a pending hybrid threat operation. HUMINT operators provide this by being:

> "Experts in their respective fields, and are on the ground to watch the developments unfold firsthand. HUMINT…give[s] analysts a perspective that 'puts their fingers on the pulse' of the situation; allowing them to know what is happening on the ground."[36]

Although military and Foreign Service HUMINT training is costly and time consuming, the payoff in situationally informed intelligence and early warning is much more likely to prevent hybrid conflicts from expanding beyond control. Even if prevention is unsuccessful, a robust HUMINT collection network could provide more effective information for subsequent military or diplomatic action.

Second, it must discard self-imposed military option limitations. The United States and its allies must be prepared to deploy medium to large-scale military contingency forces to contain and eventually defeat non-state hybrid threats. Despite recent domestic and political distaste for large-scale deployment operations, often they remain the sole manner of countering adversaries when indigenous friendly forces lack the capacity or motivation to fight.

Third, it must develop its own effective irregular force capability in order to counter state hybrid threats. Historically, U.S. Special Operations Forces

[36] Margolis, "The Lack of HUMINT: A Recurring Intelligence Problem."

(SOF) have filled this role. Each U.S. Special Forces Group and Naval Special Warfare Detachment has a regional focus that includes immersive cultural and language training. Unfortunately, OPTEMPO requirements in support of operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Northern Africa, and the Philippines has forced SOF teams to operate outside of their areas of expertise. The United States should dramatically expand SOF end strength and realign them back to their areas of geographical and cultural expertise.

Fourth, to counter both state and non-state hybrid threats, it must reinforce, introduce, and in some cases re-introduce American forces stationed overseas. The end of the Cold War resulted in a withdrawal of most U.S. forces from Europe and South Korea. It now relies on an expeditionary capability to counter regional threats. Since hybrid threats are able to achieve rapid tactical gains through the ambiguity of their actions, U.S. counter-action, especially via a time consuming and expensive expeditionary military deployment, is often ineffective. Reinforcing, introducing, or re-introducing permanently-assigned military forces stationed overseas provides a deterrent effect to prevent hybrid conflict, or a rapid response capability should deterrence fail.

Fifth, echoing the CJCS' 2015 National Military Strategy, the United States must foster innovation in military and Foreign Service personnel.[37] Expanding their opportunities for rigorous academic graduate schooling prepares them for recognizing opportunities, and developing innovative solutions while operating in a complex environment.

Domestic Economic Policy Changes

The changes mentioned above are expensive and thus infeasible given the United States' current economic situation. In order to make these options feasible, it must make domestic economic policy changes. First, it must streamline the military budget process and find additional savings. Currently, budget sequestration requirements force services to raid their training and readiness budget in order to meet budget reduction regulations. Instead, services should be allowed to close unnecessary military bases in the continental United States using the well-established BRAC procedures. Developing procedures to limit Congressional resistance to responsible off-ramp redundant infrastructure could allow this.

[37] U.S. Department of Defense, *National Military Strategy 2015*.

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Second, the budget deficit is a daunting threat. Frankly, U.S. international security/foreign policy requirements, when combined with domestic agendas, are very expensive. Unfortunately, expenditures far outreach revenues; the only way to remedy this is to decrease expenditures (unlikely) or increase revenues (painful). The United States must find a way to raise the American revenue base through a graduated increase in taxes while searching for money-saving measures in the current budget.

Conclusion

One can draw two main conclusions from this research. First, predicting the future is hard; however, contemporary events do provide some indicators that hybrid conflicts, both state and non-state led, more than any other threat pose serious danger to the safety and security of the United States, especially when the country is involved in economic belt-tightening. Second, defending against this threat is difficult. Unfortunately, there is not a cheap method to prevent or counter hybrid threats. The U.S. government, military, and general population must be prepared to take drastic measures to finance an appropriately-equipped counterforce without resulting in its own state's economic ruin. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) General Dempsey was correct when he stated:

> "We will not realize the goals of this 2015 National Military Strategy without sufficient resources…To execute this strategy; the U.S. military requires a sufficient level of investment in capacity, capabilities, and readiness so that when our Nation calls, our military remains ready to deliver success."[38]

Determining this mix in capacity, capability, and readiness is hard in isolation. When balanced against domestic initiatives and requirements, it becomes even harder. Academics and policymakers must combine forces to determine the best mix.

[38] Ibid.